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### **--How do we STOP domestic abuse of women?**

Every time one hears of a woman being abused in a marriage, or any other relationship, the instinct of most decent people is to run to her defense but when it happens in a place like the Bay Area, the reaction is amplified by the shock that how it can happen “in a place like this”, amongst “these highly educated and elite people”!

Why do women tend to get abused by men? Is this because they are (seen to be) weaker than men?

Typically, men ARE physically bigger and stronger than the women they marry; apparently 15-20% bigger/ stronger. Some women may be weaker financially, as they are not working professionally; and depend on their husbands to provide for them. It is possible that some women are less educated than their husbands. But why does this matter? It matters because most marriages are symptomatic of this issue. In a majority of Indian marriages, even to this day, there is ego and considerations of social status in play. In most cases a man cannot accept marrying a woman “superior” to him professionally/ financially/ educationally. Somewhat surprisingly, many women also feel the same way. Partly because they themselves cannot accept marrying someone inferior to them and partly they know that the man would not be able to handle it. And certainly, society at large is not ready for such a union! (I did a brief survey with my friends and family about this – and roughly 60-70% of them agreed with the above.) This makes for a marriage being an unequal relationship right off the bat.

### **Social as well as biological conditioning**

Some men who take care of their wives’ physical safety and financial wellbeing, start to expect that their wives will be compliant to their varied demands, small or big and sadly they end up crossing the boundaries of healthy relationship. And women, who are already conditioned by society to be compliant cannot fight these unfair demands and gradually the relationship becomes abusive, where typically women get abused.

### **How do we stop these women from getting abused?**

I have a daughter who is now in college. I would like to believe that she has grown up to become a reasonably independent, smart, sensible and sensitive young woman. All her life we emphasized that she can do whatever she wants to do and never think that she could not do what boys could or were allowed to do. Still, at some point – perhaps in middle school – she (and her girlfriends) came to a conclusion that some things were best left to the boys, for example, who could ask who out for a date and who had to make the first move asking someone for a dance at a school ball! Nothing we said could shake her from that point of view– she simply said “that is JUST the way it is!” So, in spite of being told all through her life that she is equal to any boy in every respect, especially in whatever she wanted to do professionally,

socially, personally – and in key issues where SHE had to make the choice, she still has a notion that there are certain things only the guys must/ can do; and woman must not do.

How do we stop women from getting abused? I am not sure!

### **Get an early start!**

Perhaps all parents, right from the start, should ensure that both their sons and daughters get equal share of their attention, wealth, support for their professional growth and most importantly, for their independence. Parents' dreams for their daughters and sons should be identical.

We also have to educate our society, starting with ourselves, to stop stigmatizing women who are not following expected gender role stereotypes in their behavior, lifestyle or outlook in life and treat them as EQUAL. We shouldn't judge them based on their clothes, their lifestyle, their choice of friends, if they have boyfriends or whether they want to "settle down" or not!

If we can deal with our sons and nephews having a string of girlfriends, and give them just a frown as a rebuke, or worse still, consider their approach to relationships to be their ability to attract the opposite sex almost with pride, we need to be able to deal with our daughters and nieces doing exactly the same, without labeling or letting anyone else label them as being "a girl of loose morals" or worse, a girl who "sleeps around"!

Certainly, all boys and young men MUST be made aware of the equal rights and status of women that are around them – their siblings, friends, colleagues, girlfriends and ultimately, their wives. That when they marry, they must seek and marry women whom they honestly see as their equals in every aspect and can respect them without hesitation. They should have equal obligation to share the burdens of running a family – both inside and outside the house.

Can we get there? I certainly hope so, and I see enough signs but I believe we still have a long way to go. While it is important to educate boys, parents and society about gender equality, the most important people who need to be "trained" are the women themselves.

### **Women must get up, speak up and stand up for their rights!**

Women have to believe that they are equal to men and don't need anyone else's validation, permission or approval. Women have to stand up and get strong enough to fight for themselves. They must realize that they have to be prepared to be on their own – strong, independent and powerful – as much as, or more than, their male counterparts. There are numerous articles and studies to prove that women are stronger and more resilient in many situations – both inside the home and outside. They need to own that power right from the start – whether it is education or career choices, or in the selection of their marriage partners. They don't need to be afraid to try out whatever they want to achieve. They need to educate their well-meaning and over-protective family members that they are not less than their brothers. Ultimately, women should stand up for their equity in all aspects of their life – marriage, relationships, home and workplace. While well-meaning and decent people, and organizations such as Maitri, will ALWAYS come to their help if they find themselves in any abusive situation, my hope is that long before they get in such unfortunate situation they will be able take care of themselves without any fear. As I tell my daughter, the ONLY thing I want her to be careful about is her own physical safety, she shouldn't be careless about that. Girls and women overwhelmingly get abused physically, sexually and emotionally by someone they know or by strangers. I don't want her to be afraid of anything; but I do want her to be careful about her safety. If she finds herself in a situation that she doesn't want to be in, then, she should fight for her rights. And we always will be there to support her.

Thank you to Maitri for supporting abused women and men in need. But I do hope for an ideal world where organizations such as Maitri aren't even needed! I know that is a tall order. Perhaps, in the short run, we can train our daughters in martial arts that is supposed to prepare people both physically and mentally tough. Maybe that's the way to make a start – if my daughter is better prepared, then I am less stressed about her safety but I guess, I will be stressed one way or another. Bottom line, I will always support her from being herself and doing whatever she wants! :)